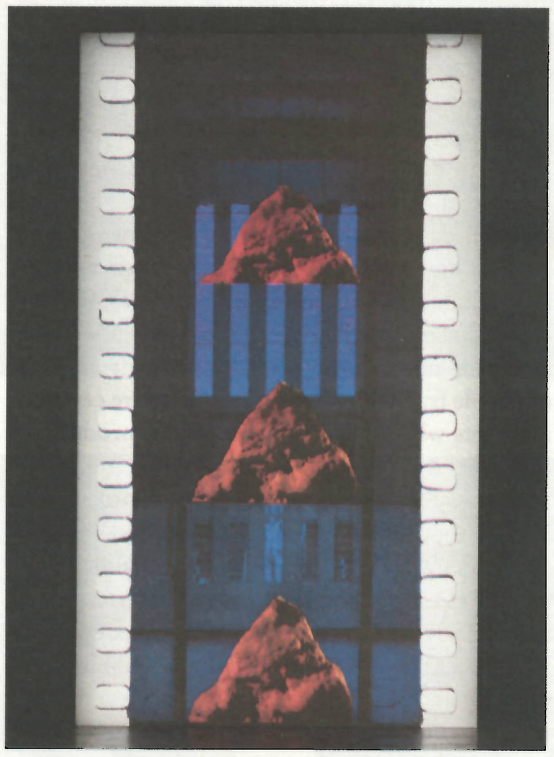
Lis Rhodes, Light Music, 1975,
installation view, Tate Modern, 2012.
Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Tate
Photography

THOUGHTS ABOUT CURATING MOVING IMAGES

ERIKA BALSOM,
MAEVE CONNOLLY
AND CHRISSIE ILES,
IN CONVERSATION
WITH FILIPA RAMOS

Love is blind, they say, which might say a lot about the infatuation of the art world with time-based media and practices. This passion has led to exponential growth in the amount of performances, happenings, musical, theatrical and dance events, as well as the presentation of films and videos by artists and filmmakers in museums and galleries. Articles, interviews and criticism reflect the same focus. Yet such an inebriating love affair may push aside discussion of the conditions for the responsible hosting of such media, which precisely due to their transient and less commodifiable nature can easily be segregated or neglected once their strategic purpose has been fulfilled.
This is why it continues to seem important to widen the field of debate on the aspects of curating time-based media—and in particular the moving image—shifting the discussion on exhibiting cinema from the circuits of the moving image towards those of the contemporary arts context, because it is mostly in art galleries that the problematics of commissioning, display and conservation of time-based media need to be acknowledged and considered. With a specific focus on the moving image, Filipa Ramos discusses such issues with Erika Balsom (Carleton University, Ottawa), Maeve Connolly (author of *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*) and Chrissie Iles (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), who like few others have been making an outstanding contribution towards the encounter between arts and cinema.



Tacita Dean, Film, 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

filipa ramos: Why do you think that after more than a century of relation to the moving image, and after many intensive forms of dialogue between cinema and the contexts and venues of art, there is still an urgent need to define the terms of the presentation of cinema within the museum/gallery space?

erika balsom: The tremendous enthusiasm for the moving image in contemporary art belies the fact that much of the history of cinema in the museum is a history of institutional unfriendliness. After founding the Museum of Modern Art's film library in 1935, Iris Barry remarked that the relationship of the film library to the rest of the museum was like the "slightly ambiguous position of the adopted child who is never seen in the company of the family". I think this statement can be generalized to speak of the broader condition of the moving image in most museums until the early 1990s, when projection becomes the dominant mode of presentation for video and art's infatuation with cinema finally begins to take hold. The severe belatedness of the institutional acceptance of the moving image is a key part of what generates the feeling of urgency to think through the relationships between art and cinema today: there is a whole history to recover and contextualize that has still not received adequate consideration, as well as a proliferation of vibrant contemporary practices. Moreover, during the same period digitization has made the moving image transportable across formats and exhibition spaces like never before, radically altering the possibilities of presentation and prompting a reconsideration of established display contexts like the movie theatre. In the wake of such immense transformations, an imperative arises to take account of the new role of screens in the museum and gallery, especially as these spaces are increasingly the institutional site of many practices that would have (or in fact did) exist in the movie theatre in the past.

maeve connolly: I'm not sure it is useful or even possible to define the "terms of presentation" of cinema—or artists' moving images—in the museum/gallery. It seems to me that the dialogue between cinema and the contexts of art is necessarily ongoing, and always contingent upon broader shifts in cultural economies of art and media. For example, the renewed institutional focus on performance and what Noah Horowitz terms "experiential art" (in *The Art of the Deal*, 2011) is likely to impact the strategies, supports or resources involved in the commissioning, curating, exhibition and preservation of artists' moving images. So at present, it seems especially important to engage with broader debates in artistic and curatorial practice, concerning temporality, dramaturgy and choreography. Personally, I found the 2012 conference "TIMING—On The Temporal Dimension of Exhibiting", organised by Cultures of the Curatorial and Studio International in Leipzig, to be very useful in thinking through the current relationship between cinema and art contexts. Also, it seems important to emphasise that galleries are not just sites for the "presentation" of moving images. They are also spaces in which social, material and cultural aspects of cinema (and television) are represented and mediated, through artistic and curatorial practice.

chrissie iles: The terms of cinema's relationship to the museum/gallery will always be in flux, because our perception of time and materiality is constantly changing. The gallery is a kind of blank screen onto which the shifting shape of visual culture projects itself. Film, embraced by artists since its invention, is part of that visual culture, and appears in different forms on this "screen" according to how those shifts occur. As the location and meaning of cinema disperses, the museum/gallery has become a place where this dispersion can be explored, through a flexible approach to projective space. Unlike the cinema, whose physical design limits it to a single purpose, the white cube of the gallery can both assert the traditional conditions of cinema—darkness, silence, stillness, dedicated attention- and also dismantle them. This paradox allows cinema to operate at its fullest level, as both a distinct practice and as a transformative presence within the larger visual culture to which it belongs. Cinema's presentation within the museum/gallery must, then, always remain contentious, in order to calibrate the changes that are constantly taking place in our relationship to the object, temporality, and space.

fr: Do you think that places especially conceived to host time-based practices (and also the moving image), such as Tate Modern's Tanks, contribute to heal the chasm between cinema and art or, on the contrary, intensify the intrinsic separation of practices by generating a place of difference within institutions?

ci: The gap between cinema and art is largely driven by the narrative structure of cinema, and its different history, of which the art world is largely ignorant. There is a distinction between expanded cinema and film installation, which are shown both in museum galleries and in spaces such as the Tanks at the Tate, and the screening of a film that is meant to be seen from beginning to end. The Tanks are distinct from the Tate's cinema, in which independent film, experimental film and artists' films are shown. Different kinds of art and film need different kinds of spaces to be experienced properly. The biggest challenge to presenting art of any kind is not the separation of different practices, but the exposure of them in equal measure to audiences, so that a film, a painting, a drawing and a performance can all be equally valued on their own terms. The issue is not a matter of place but of time. If a film is available to audiences in the same way that a painting is, constantly rather than once or twice at a particular time, it has a much greater chance of being seen, appreciated and understood. Artists are complicating this in interesting ways by increasingly making films meant only to be seen in a cinema setting. Thus we had the paradox in Documenta 11 of the independent filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger's 8-hour film shown constantly in the gallery,[1] and a film by Steve McQueen screened in another gallery nearby only at specific times.[2] Filmmaker and artist had crossed over into each other's territory, making two different kinds of cinema in the gallery, differentiated only by the time framework of their presentation.

mc: I only experienced part of "The Tanks: Fifteen Weeks of Art in Action", but the programme seemed quite focused upon the changing form and

Ulrike Ottinger, South East Passage, 2002. Courtesy: the artist

Steve McQueen, Caribs' Leap / Western Deep, 2002. Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

context of the museum as "mass medium", to use Chris Dercon's own terminology.[1] It certainly did address historical links between film, performance, sculpture and installation, but not necessarily for the purpose of drawing these forms closer together. Maybe it would be more useful to see The Tanks as a place of difference that allowed Tate Modern to test—and publicly display—new relationships and approaches to audiences.

fr: The dialectics of location and dislocation of the moving image seem to still dominate contemporary artistic contexts. However, the continuous openness of such debate never allows for a formation of a canon of exhibiting artists' cinema. Could one be envisaged?

mc: I agree that the dialectics of location and dislocation shape practices of production and exhibition in important ways, but I would say that several moving image works have still acquired what might be called a "canonical" status, in that they are routinely referenced in histories and surveys of artists' moving image. It's certainly difficult to become really familiar with these works without extensive travel or access to excellent documentation, but this kind of problem is not particular to artists' cinema. Maybe the more critical issue is to consider exactly how processes of canon formation actually operate at any given moment, and are continually subject to change. For example, the curators of high-profile recurrent exhibitions (such as Documenta, the Venice Biennale, Manifesta, and the Whitney Biennial) played an important role in shaping critical discourse around artists' moving image during the 1990s and 2000s, and in confirming the significance of specific practices. Large-scale curated surveys continue to fulfil this function, but I have a sense that in recent years smaller organisations have become more prominent as moving image commissioners, often sharing their resources and working in partnership to co-produce, publicise and distribute ambitious film and video works to disparate constituencies, both online and offline. Some of the artists showcased in *Mousse*'s new initiative Vdrome seem to work in this way, so perhaps we are currently seeing a shift in how canons of artists' cinema are produced.

fr: Education is often grounded on models and rules. Could it be that such lack of a canon prevents greater awareness of relation between the moving image and art, and the specificities of exhibiting cinema?

eb: As scholarship in this field accumulates, I do think it is possible to see a nascent canon in formation—though by no means one that is complete or uncontested. However, part of the problem stems from the fact that within the academy artists' cinema is stuck in a disciplinary no man's land: art history has traditionally avoided the moving image or at least viewed it as a minor art form, while cinema studies have tended to concentrate much more on experimental practices located within the space of the movie theatre than on installation-based work. This is gradually starting to change, but there is no doubt that the disciplinary structures of the academy lag desperately behind the state of practice. Even as an interdisciplinary space begins to open, it is without question that the methodologies, priorities and historical reference points of individuals trained in cinema studies tend to differ from those of people trained in art history. There are certainly moments when this dissonance can be productive; however, it often leads to tension and misunderstanding. There is a long legacy of approaches to cinema that see it as less serious and less important than other mediums. As someone with a background in cinema studies, I am particularly allergic to scholarly and curatorial practices that continue to replicate such attitudes today, something that unfortunately happens far too often—even when the ostensible objective is to elevate the moving image to the status of art.

fr: The vast circulation of personal, portable digital cameras and screens are severely altering the conditions of production, distribution and consumption of images in general and of moving images in particular. Do you think that this is affecting the creation and fruition of artist's moving images? In what way?

mc: Yes, both directly and indirectly. As a result of widespread use of portable screens, in conjunction with social media technologies, rituals and practices of television viewing (and modes of production) have altered significantly, for some constituencies at least. This might be one reason why artists and curators are currently drawn toward television, to the extent that some of them are even engaging in its memorialisation. In this respect, there are potential parallels to be drawn with the cinematic turn apparent in exhibitions and artworks during the 1990s and early 2000s. The proliferation of portable screens—and widespread use of social media—has also had a significant impact on art education. Younger practitioners, including those working in contexts with limited institutional supports for moving image collection and exhibition, now often have increased access to information about histories of media, and opportunities to view and share works online. This doesn't mean that artists are abandoning older strategies for the sharing and discussion of moving image work. Instead, I would say that there is a continued emphasis on structures that can enable productive face-to-face contact amongst peers, such as the Critical Forums established in dialogue with LUX, in London, Glasgow and Dublin, which seek to create a mutually supportive environment for artists to discuss ideas and practices.

eb: In my view, digitization is an enabling precondition for the turn towards cinema in moving image art from the 1990s onwards. It makes possible high-quality video projection and accessible editing software. It institutes a vernacular visuality characterized by mobile spectatorship and multiple screen-windows. It transforms the dominant conception of cinema from an ideological apparatus to be refused and/or dismantled to a storehouse of forms to be mined and even mourned. In this sense, the moving image in the gallery absolutely participates in the broader movements of media convergence that are taking place across the cultural field. But, as I argue in my book, recent gallery-based moving image practices do not simply reflect the mutations and migrations of cinema after digitization, but also in some instances offer cogent critical reflections on them. Some projects explicitly take up the implications of new media, such as Rabih Mroué's *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012), while others interrogate the obsolescence that inevitably follows from technological novelty, such as much of Tacita Dean's film work. In their determination to think through the contemporary transformations of the image, such artists might be considered as producing film theory through practice, something I find to be one of the most interesting aspects of moving image art today.

ci: The vast fluidity and resulting banality of the moving image in contemporary life has created a new situation which, like every revolution in technology, has had both a positive and a negative impact. The negative impact is a homogenization of the visual surface of the moving image by HD, and an exaggerated concentration on forensic detail and harsh light. Soon projection will disappear altogether, which will have a profound effect on the experience and making of film. The unprecedented accessibility to movies online means that that fewer people are going to the cinema, preferring the convenience of seeing films alone or with others at home. On the other hand, people have access to more film material from the past than ever before, and there are more improvised screenings and eccentric cinema spaces such as the Blue Balcony, a cinema sculpture like a tree house, built in a tiny garden in the East Village, whose interior evokes the atmosphere of the movie palaces of the 1920s. Young filmmakers and artists are newly interested in Super-8 and 16mm film, and in odd film developing and projection techniques, not as a nostalgic impulse but as a form of resistance to the control of our visual experience by our over-saturated, commercialized, HD visual environment. Like literature, the moving image will live on in both a material and a virtual form, and I predict that, like books, the materiality of film will become increasingly valued. But the next generation will never know what it is not to have their brain and their eyes mediated by technology, and it is only when the current generation of artists and filmmakers from the 1970s fades away, and their influence finally recedes into history, that we will see how disturbing the new conditions of making and consuming the moving image actually are.

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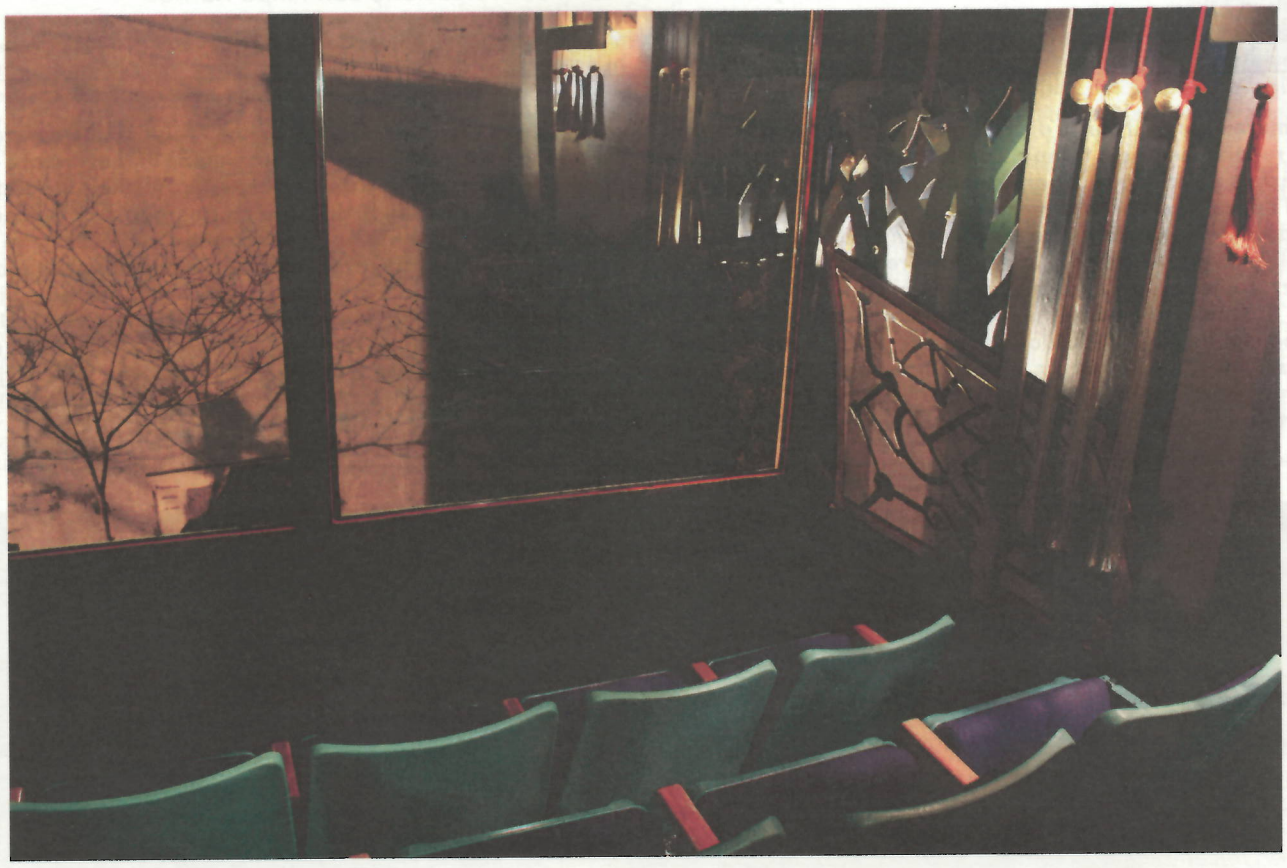
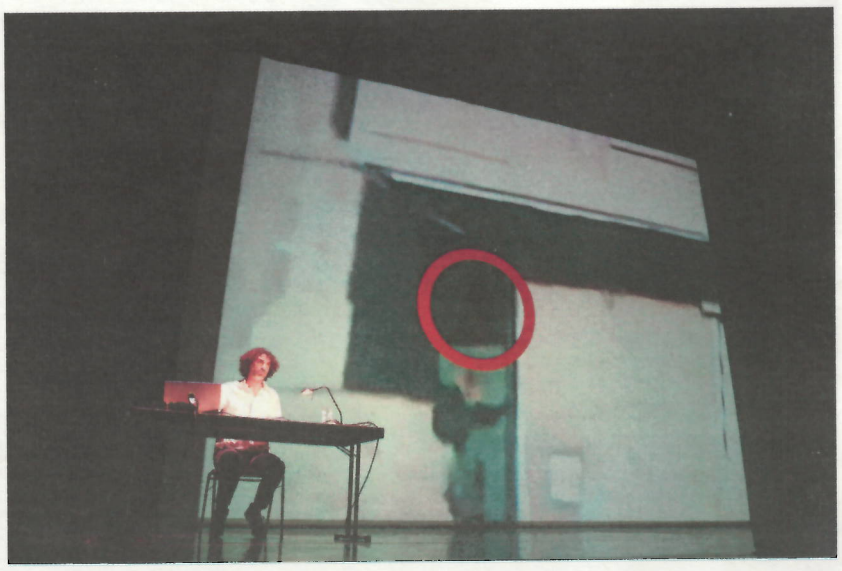
1. *Southeast Passage*, (Digital Betacam/DVD, 363', 2002).
2. *Caribs' Leap / Western Deep* (video, 3 projections, maximum duration 28'53", 2002).
3. Chris Dercon, 'An Open Manifesto: 15 Weeks of Art in Action', *The Tanks Programme Notes*, London: Tate Trustees, 2012.





Above and right – Rabih Mrouè, The Pixelated Revolution, performance at dOCUMENTA(13), 2012. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut/Hamburg. Photo: Olaf Pascheit

Top and left – Top row view from inside the Blue Balcony, New York, and exterior view of the Blue Balcony in garden.